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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000167

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: WHITHER URI PARTY?

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The progressive Uri Party, facing rock bottom popularity with only single-digit support, suffered another major setback with the departure of Goh Kun from the presidential race on January 16. First and foremost challenge for Uri leaders is to decide what form the party should take at its party convention on February 14. Second, the party members must try to devise a strategy that will renew the party's popular support; and finally each member has to look for a method to position him/herself to have a chance to save his or her seat in the April 2008 parliamentary elections. Success of the progressives to build a legitimate challenge to the opposition GNP presidential candidates will depend on whether they can separate themselves from President Roh and the mistakes associated with the current administration. End summary.

Goh Kun Card Gone

¶2. (C) Until January 16, many agreed that when the Uri Party splinters (a foregone conclusion according to most pundits and Uri officials), some of the 139 members would move to a new party and support the non-Grand National Party (GNP) candidate with the most popular support, former Prime Minister Goh Kun. For undisclosed reasons, Goh withdrew from the race on January 16. This leaves the Uri Party with no candidates with double digit support (Note: Chung Dong-young was the leading Uri candidate with January 16 poll results ranging from 1.9 percent in a Munwha Ilbo poll to 6.6 percent in a Christian Broadcasting Service radio poll. End Note)

Reform Group

¶3. (C) In order to create a new image for the progressives not based on regionalism or associated with the current administration, Uri Rep. Choi Jae-cheon told poloff the Uri Party will break up into several factions and that the goal of each faction (or new party) will be to unite all the groups to present one candidate from the non-GNP, progressive camp by September or October. Choi said he and a group of 10 reform-minded lawmakers were considering leaving the party in late January to spearhead the formation of a new, reform-minded party. The new party would turn its back on regionalism, extreme left-wing lawmakers and conservative Uri members as well but would be open to individual Democratic Party or GNP members joining their ranks. Choi added that the resulting party would ideally focus on policy and reform

and if successful, would naturally bring in support from prominent NGO leaders such as Park Won-soon. Uri Rep. Oh Young-sik announced on January 17 that, "we have reached an agreement to build a new party that unites all peace and reform-minded forces with a vision to reconcile with North Korea, and respond to the middle and working class."

Chung Dong-young and Kim Geun-tae: Any Hope?

¶4. (C) Former Uri Chairman Chung Dong-young (DY) and current Uri Chairman Kim Geun-tae (GT) announced in December 2006 they would work together to form a new party that would be based on the original Uri Party tenets of clean politics and reform. Both Chung and Kim have presidential aspirations but neither have achieved broad support in any polls. Chung's top result was 6.6 percent in a Christian Broadcasting Service poll and Kim received 0.5 percent support in a January 16 Munhwa Ilbo poll and 2.7 percent rating from a Christian Broadcasting Service radio poll. Chung polls fourth in most polls (behind GNP candidates Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye and Sohn Hak-kyu) and Kim polls sixth or seventh, depending on the poll, well behind the GNP hopefuls as well as non-declared candidates such as Chung Un-chan and Kang Geum-shil. While DY and GT may succeed in reorganizing the Uri Party, their past association with the Uri Party and President Roh will likely make it difficult to present themselves as viable candidates for the future or for any party they lead to develop legitimacy. According to Chung's advisors, despite his past with Roh, Chung, with his broadcaster background and smooth speaking style, will be able to persuade voters he has the best vision for Korea's future. Kim Geun-tae supporters tell poloff that Kim has a vast network of committed voters from his time as leader of the democracy movement that, when mobilized, could be a force in the elections.

New Candidates?

¶5. (C) The reform group that anticipates starting a new party, as well as the DY and GT groups, hope to bring in new faces to the race to increase public interest. All non-GNP candidates expressed that Goh Kun would support their campaign and Goh may still do so, giving whichever candidate he backs an instant boost in the southwest Jeolla region. One position that Uri officials and experts admit is that new faces need to be recruited to the progressive team. Of course, presidential hopefuls such as DY and GT hope they will emerge as the candidate, but even they realize they would benefit from a vigorous primary season with several popular new faces, according to their advisors and many pundits. The reform group in the Uri Party requires a new face to distinguish them from the current Uri Party. Seoul National University Professor Chung Un-chan, NGO leader Park Won-soon, and former Justice Minister Chun Jung-bae are among the names that are mentioned by those in the reform camp as possible candidates to lead the party. While unlikely, the progressives would welcome reform-minded GNP candidates Sohn Hak-kyu or Won Hee-ryong to join them as candidates. A new party has to form to make this a possibility for either Sohn or Won. Even then, pundits agree a defection by either GNP candidate, while clearly helpful to the progressives, would be politically risky for Sohn and Won, who many believe are already aiming for the next campaign in 2012. However, Won and Sohn's advisors told poloff that if the GNP did not turn its back on extreme conservatism and the overall political circumstances became favorable, they were prepared to leave the GNP to a new, reform-minded party.

2008 on the Horizon

¶6. (C) The parliamentary elections, where all 299 members of the National Assembly will be up for re-election, will be held in April 2008, just two months after the next Korean President takes office. Therefore, while each politician always aims to ally themselves with a winner, it is doubly

important this time around since the presidential election outcome will have a greater than normal influence on the assembly elections. It is very possible that the Uri Party will break up either at the February convention or later this year. Despite pledges to leave the Uri Party to join Goh by one lawmaker publicly (Rep. Yum Dong-youn) and several in private (sources at the Assembly told poloff that Defense Committee Chairman Rep. Kim Song-gun committed to leave the party privately but never did so) none of the Uri lawmakers have yet left the security of the 139 member ruling Uri Party. It is possible many lawmakers will be more reluctant to take political gambles (such as changing parties or joining a new party) this election cycle since the assembly elections come so soon after the presidential election.

Comment

17. (C) Most predict the Uri Party will announce a break up of the party at its February 14 convention. It is likely there will be two to three parties that emerge in the spring and summer as a result of the announcement and internal fighting on the progressive side. First, Roh loyalists will likely cling to their party and try to field a liberal candidate for president such as Health and Welfare Minister Rhyu Si-min. Second, the reform-minded members will likely form a new party. If this second group succeeds in bringing in the small (11 members) Democratic Party (DP), perhaps there will be only two new political groups. However, it is also possible that the Uri Party could splinter into more factions based on region or policy or both. Regardless, the goal of all of the factions will be to unite all the progressive voters and politicians behind one candidate by August or September.

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